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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the literacy needs of adolescents staying in short-term crisis intervention centers--shelters for teens who have run away or are otherwise homeless. During a 6-month period, interviews were conducted in a non-threatening, informal environment; the adolescents responded to open-ended questions about their histories of reading and writing, their present uses of reading and writing and their future uses. Results indicated that reading and writing were a part of these teens' daily lives. The consensus was that reading and writing were both school-related and personal. Despite the general upheaval in their lives, school remained a major part of their lives. Only one interviewee maintained that reading and writing were a waste of time. Others identified horror and mystery as their favorite kinds of reading. In the past, clients remembered with pleasure visiting their school libraries. All of the adolescents remembered being read to as children. In terms of the future, the adolescents explained their vocational plans and clearly stated specific reading and writing skills required for job success. However, even though the clients were future oriented, most of them were unaware of their inability to compete academically. (TB)

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Literacy Perceptions of Runaway Adolescents

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Each year thousands of adolescents run away from home because they are abused or are in need of immediate intervention.

To serve these runaways, short-term crisis intervention centers are found throughout the United States. These shelters provide a temporary home-like environment to adolescents who have run away or are otherwise homeless. Most shelters are non-profit organizations, not governmental agencies. The goals of these safe havens are to meet the immediate needs of the youth by providing shelter and, through individual and family counseling, to enable the adolescents to return home. (Hahm, 1994)

In New Jersey, one of the most populous states in the nation, there are five shelters for at-risk youth. One of these shelters was the site of the present study. The purpose of this study was twofold: first, to identify literacy perception, that is, what literacy means to runaway adolescents; and second, to dispel the stereotype of the runaway adolescent as an uneducable individual.

A recent search of the literature provided little information about runaway adolescents and literacy. Only two studies, conducted in separate locales, are somewhat relevant. However, both are detailed accounts of the implementation of specific instructional programs, rather than an analysis and synthesis of subject response.

Carbone (1992) designed and implemented a literacy skills improvement program for delinquent adolescent males residing in a juvenile correction facility. Results indicated an improved attitude toward reading as well as a reduction in disciplinary reports. Mulkey and others (1990) describe an

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instructional program for delinquent adolescents residing in group homes along with adults and children. According to the results, 94% of the population reached or exceeded their goals which included reading skills instruction. Unlike the Carbone study, this program was conducted by the local school authority. Again, these school-based studies assume that the adolescents are in need of literacy skills instruction. Neither researcher investigated the actual needs of the population.

The present study took place during a six month period when the researcher interviewed new residents of a temporary shelter about their perceptions of literacy. To obtain data for further analysis, it was necessary to establish a non-threatening environment. Therefore, the researcher, who was familiar with the group home staff, maintained an unassuming role in a relaxed atmosphere. Because of their status at the shelter, the adolescents are queried by a number of state, county, and local social services professionals. In order to gain their familiarity, the researcher dressed casually and spoke on a first-name basis with the adolescents. Previous experiences with at-risk, urban students helped the researcher to establish rapport quickly with each client.

In the one-to-one interviews, the adolescents responded to open-ended questions about their histories of reading and writing, their present uses of reading and writing, and their future literacy needs related to individual vocational plans. Figure 1. details the specific questions asked of each resident. Because they followed the chronological order and distinguished the two locations, home and school, the respondents painted a clear picture of themselves and literacy.

Figure 1

	School	Home
PAST	Tell me about learning to read? Did you receive extra help? Did you visit the library?	Were you read to as a child? Were there newspapers, books, magazines at home? Did you visit the library?
PRESENT	When you are in school, how much reading and writing do you do?	Do you enjoy reading? What is your favorite genre? Do you subscribe to any magazines? Do you write a journal?
FUTURE	What job would you like to do? How much reading and writing does that job require?	

An analysis of these informal interviews offers a first-time overview of this teenage population - runaway adolescents. The interviews with these residents of a safe shelter reveal that reading and writing is part of their daily lives. The consensus is that reading and writing are both school-related and personal. All of the clients attend school on a regular basis and gave no indication of leaving. Despite the general upheaval in their lives, school remains a major part of it. Because of this, educationists should listen regularly to adolescents and to the non-school professionals who help them.

In discussing their past literacy experiences, the clients remembered with pleasure visiting their school libraries. None of the clients received "extra help," which was described as going out of the classroom for reading. Nearly all of the respondents stated that newspapers and magazines were delivered to their homes. All of the adolescents remembered

being read to as a young child.

In order not to disrupt their present education, shelter residents continue to attend their "home school districts." Oftentimes, their teachers are unaware of the turmoil occurring in their lives. The interviewees described their present academic reading and writing in detail. Only one client stated emphatically that reading and writing was a "waste of time." The others identified horror stories and mysteries as their favorite "unassigned" reading. Several of the adolescents considered journal writing as an emotional release; teachers and therapists were instrumental with this use of writing.

While describing their literacy needs, the residents disregarded their current uncertain day-to-day living conditions. Rather, they explained their vocational plans and clearly stated specific reading and writing skills required for job success. One respondent who has worked in the restaurant business said that the requirement for a chef is to read recipes and judge measurements. Another adolescent who attends vocational high school said that the requirement for a nail technician is to read the directions on the nail art and acrylic kits.

Even though the clients were future-oriented, most of them were unaware of their inability to compete academically. One resident who expressed a sincere desire to be a veterinarian had little science background.

Analysis of the interviews with the residents reveals that literacy is a major part of their lives. Even with their traumatic home lives, these adolescents recognize the importance of reading and writing. They identified favorite authors and commented on the value of journal writing.

Despite these positive responses about literacy, one wonders whether

these adolescents because of their backgrounds will receive instruction and support from their teachers.

When considering the goal of literacy for all, one questions whether this potentially exploitable population is overlooked by the educational community.

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